DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 714 CS 204 383

AUTHOR Woods, William F.
TITLE A Teaching Seminar in the Mirror of Freshman English.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 12p.; Study prepared at Wichita State University

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Objectives; *Audiences; College Freshmen; Communication Problems; *Composition Skills (Literary); *English Instruction; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Humanistic Education; Individual Development; Self Concept; *Small Group Instruction; Teacher Improvement; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

A teacher's small group experiences in a graduate seminar in affective teaching techniques provided insights that carried over to a freshman composition course. At the beginning of the semester the 26 seminar members, meeting in one group, concealed their insecurities by bombarding each other with obscurities. Similarly, beginning composition students write in ambiguities to prevent attacks against their ideas; students are also writing "what the teacher wants" and not for a real audience. When the seminar group was split into small discussion groups, participants began to focus on meaningful conversation, and student writing in the composition class began to improve when students were divided into small groups to react to each other's work. Both the seminar members and the freshman writers were helped by the mirror of their audiences to see themselves more clearly. Seminar members also learned to concentrate on each other's contributions and help speakers gain new insights into what they had said. In the freshman class, students began to write for each other. Two students wrote readers' theater scripts for others to read aloud, and one student wrote about her religious customs to enlighten her classmates. The small group experiences helped to create a true writer/audience relationship. (GW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

William F. Woods
Department of English
Wichita State University
Wichita, Kansas 67208

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

William F. Woods

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ED159714

A TEACHING SEMINAR IN THE MIRROR OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH

Most college courses are shaped by the mold of their content -- literary history, genre study, whatever -- but it is often the case that the Composition course just seems to wind its way along to a conclusion in June, when it stops short, groping for the sense of an ending. Formlessness is an inherent danger in freshman English, due to the absence of easily definable "content," and the sometimes imperceptibly slow improvement of the students' writing skills. But because form and structure are as necessary to Comp courses as they are to any other kind, I think it worthwhile to describe my experiences with two quite different courses which did fall into shape, suggesting that writing classes can develop their own, internal kind of organization.

Both of these courses were held in the Spring at Indiana University, but there the resemblance ends. One was a standard freshman Comp class, but the other was an experimental, or as some said, "exploratory" seminar in "affective teaching techniques." Freely translated, affective teaching simply means whatever goes on in the classroom when a teacher is aware of how his behavior affects the students, and of how he himself responds to their behavior; but what we studied in the seminar turned out to be less an analysis of teaching methods than an extended attempt to define the assumptions and motives that lie behind the methods teachers develop as they go along. Consequently, while the freshmen in my Comp class were busy discovering themselves as writers, the teachers (both faculty and graduate students) were trying to discover the keys to

CS204383

their own success.

As I will try to suggest, the progress these two groups made was quite similar, even parallel. Both students and teachers were learning to see themselves and their work reflected in the comments of the other people in their groups. Furthermore, as they put these insights to work in essays or in teaching presentations, the discussion was often beneficial to the group as a whole. Thus, "The Use of Group Activity to Promote Personal Insights Into Writing and Teaching" might by an appropriate sub-title for this article, and I hope it will also become clear that the evolution of group activity during a semester can give shape to a course of study. A more modest claim is that such activities are valuable because they release the potential energy of student writers -- and of teachers as well.

But when we began our seminar, early in the Spring, that potential was far from being realized. We were unquestionably a fragmented and uncomfortable group. Although there was virtually no grading pressure for the graduate students taking the seminar for credit, they were still a bit anxious about the work load. Other interest groups quickly split off according to age, background, academic discipline, and (of course) academic status. In all there were 26 of us, including five directors from Psychology, Education and English. This rather tentative bunch met in the vestry of a local church.

At the beginning, the prevailing attitude hovered somewhere between detachment and mutual distrust. We made that abstract, brittle kind of conversation that frustrates seminar directors because it means that people either can't or won't commit themselves

to the task at hand; instead, we avoided the real issues by indulging in word play. As a result, no two of us could seem to agree on any single point. The pleasure of restating things for ourselves, repeatedly, was too great, and at the end of four meetings, we were still twenty-six isolated, contentious and dissatisfied teachers.

Our disagreements began to follow some relatively simple, and in time, familiar patterns. One of the directors (also called "facilitators") would start a discussion of some aspect of teaching -- possibly something like "How should we approach the teaching of literature in freshman courses?" -- and for ninety minutes a chain reaction would continue. The first to speak out were generally those who had "trained themselves to respond in terms of gut reactions." They so responded, and were answered immediately by others who demanded logic and definition. Still others would then break off the definition hunt by citing some anecdote from their own teaching, thereby rechanneling the discussion toward their own happy visions of education.

This sketch of our obscure beginnings is probably typical of the ways teachers often fail to work together. Anyone who has attended faculty meetings can add examples. The more important point is that teachers conceal their insecurities in much the same ways student writers do. Students in beginning composition classes feel the same anxiety about committing themselves in print that teachers feel when they speak to a roomful of their colleagues. The teachers bombard their audience with obscurities while the students spread a smokescreen of ambiguities to prevent attacks against themselves and their ideas. If challenged, both invoke their majority of one.

Teachers say, "But I'm telling you what I think." Students insist, "I'm telling you what I feel."

But instead of being content with this neat parallel, let's see how a student described her attitude toward the writing she did in her composition courses: "We have learned to adapt to each new teacher we've had. We learn what the teacher likes, i.e. quotes, excessive adjectives, etc., and we style our writing to the Teach for the grade. It's only natural; grades do add pressure." Another girl spoke up when I passed out some of my own writing for inspection. She objected that while I cared about my work, and could be hurt by harsh criticism, they, the students, thought their work was crap from the beginning. They wouldn't care, no matter what I might say.

At the time, it seemed as if my class suffered from a massive inferiority complex. Could they take no pride at all in their writing, or worse, had their insecurity hardened into a fixation on that all-important A or B? Later, I wondered if teachers aren't partly responsible for this desperate cynicism adopted by students. At least that is what one student thought:

> So, then, does the fault lie with the individual teachers? Can they help it if they know what they like? It's too bad English teachers aren't more receptive to what an individual thinks is good,...developing his style instead of completely rejecting it as wrong and attempting to change it to what is standard.

But finally, trying to find out why students refuse to stand behind their writing begins to seem pointless. Their anxieties, more precisely, seem to lack definable causes. We are left with the

solid reality that for whatever reasons, their writing is ambiguous and artificial -- aimless writing, since not intended for anyone in particular. It's only "what the teacher wants." What the teacher gets, of course, is most often a parody of academic prose -- what the student thinks English teachers like (which is why that classic epithet, "Smooth and Flowing," is so durable). Teachers are not the only ones who project their feelings and impressions onto other people. Students do the same thing, and like the teachers, end up confused and isolated by their fascination with their own projected image. For that dubious image, that pitifully methodical and insincere writing, seems to hold the promise of easy writing and good, or at least acceptable grades.

In short, it's the old Narcissus story all over again. Narcissus gazed into the water, held by the "ideal" image he saw there, until he wasted away from grief and inanition. The same is true of virtually anyone who performs -- or writes -- for that audience in the mirror. Luckily, however, real audiences do exist. When the Narcissus in us finds it necessary to please a group of other teachers, or other students, he has to expand his devotions; when the audience is directly and personally important for the performer, he'll change his act to suit them. In our seminar, for example, the bravura performers would not be beaten down -- they thrived on disagreement -- but they almost invariably subsided when forced into direct, person-to-person contact with the members of a smaller group. When we finally hit upon the idea of splitting the group of twenty-six into four or five smaller discussion groups, the polemics stopped.

But the smaller groups did more than simply reduce the noise.

Whether the topic was literary analysis, classroom technique or just reminiscing about our early teaching, we now made conscious efforts to help the discussion along. At first, we supported each other with those bland remarks teachers use, but in time we learned to ask the kind of pointed questions which can define problems and lead to solutions: "Are you nervous when your class is completely silent? -- Why didn't you deal directly with that student who looked so bored? -- Do you see yourself as a father (or a mother) to your students?"

Since these small groups seemed to focus our efforts, I thought they might also be helpful in my writing class. I began to experiment, passing out dittos of the students' papers and asking them to form their discussion groups of four or five, either in the classroom or at a table in the coffee room down the hall. When the students returned from their first half hour conference, it was obvious that they had behaved somewhat like the members of our seminar; criticism of the papers was limited to such comments as "Well, I thought it was all right -- The style was very smooth and flowing -- Is it all right to use contractions like this?" Not that they didn't have opinions of their own -- far from it -- but they hadn't learned to work in groups; they lacked a vocabulary for evaluating short papers, and no one know how his own ideas about writing matched up with anyone else's (or the teacher's). By the end of the third session, however, I had started to provide this vocabulary and to suggest some ways they could help each other by their comments. Slowly, the discussions took on a more definite character. The same people began to get together regularly, and when the whole class reported back to the room to put their ideas together, each group had some distinct opinions to offer about the papers they had read

and commented on.

More important was the effect of this critical debate on the students who had written the papers. I had asked the groups to write on their copies of the papers specifically what they did or didn't like about them, to suggest some possible ways to improve the writing, and then return them to the author. The changes in the rewrites were striking. A chaotic paper on the Indiana State Legislature began to develop a satiric edge, and a rather precious character portrait of someone's grandfather dried its tears and began to say a few things about Grandfather himself. The students had become their own audience, had discovered that they had definite tastes, and were now trying to find out how to write for each other.

To return to Narcissus again, one might say that both the seminar members and the freshman writers were helped by the mirror of their audiences to see themsleves more clearly. Instead of dwelling on the hopes and dreams we had projected onto our work and onto other people, we were beginning to see what others had noticed about our teaching and writing. Yet there is finally something unsatisfying about any kind of mirror image. Mirrors are disinterested, even when they are groups of people responding sincerely to our work. In a sense, a group's response is forever a passive one; there is seldom any real momentum or sense of direction to be gained by losing oneself in the well-meaning opinions of others. An individual may benefit by accomodating himself to the values and attitudes of the group, but ultimately his personal voice is muted and he remains, simply, a co-worker.

The psychologist in our seminar must have known this all along, because once the smaller groups were working smoothly, he suggested

another activity that focussed directly on individuals. Following his directions, all twenty-six of us sat down and waited for someone to open up and talk about why he had come to the seminar, and how our activities could help him improve his approach to teaching. Once a person started talking, the rest of us had to listen until he was done, and then ask only those questions that might help him gain new insights into what he had said. Forbidden were statements masquerading as questions, beginning with "Do you mean that..." and carrying on for ten minutes. Instead we were given the task of listening, carefully, to what one particular person had thought, hoped for, attempted.

Needless to say, few were eager to expose their ideas in public like this, but people finally spoke out, and when they did, it was surprising how strongly the enforced concentration affected the rest of us. By forcing ourselves to consider the problems from someone else's point of view, rather than simply saying how we would have done it, we could appreciate more directly the problems implicit in his teaching.

Clearly, these particular group sessions were beneficial to us as teachers, because it is in the classroom that the greatest demands are made on our sensitivity and tact. If a teacher wants his students to generate their own drive and maintain it after they leave the course, he has to pay some attention to them as individuals. And that means helping them distinguish themselves from the rest of the class in some positive manner.

In my own class of freshman writers, I had no method for bringing out the individual writer in each student -- at least nothing beyond what I was already doing by copyreading the papers and making the

class its own audience. As an incentive to write this was hardly adequate. As one of the older students put it, "I'd estimate my writing as being as spastic and/or as moving as graffitti; kept in a fluid state by merely a trifle more effort than the power realized by the sheer obligation that an assignment generates." The artificiality of any writing class is chilling, and freshman Comp is the archetype, frozen deep in the ninth circle of the writer's hell. Teachers sometimes lose faith and wonder if any writing can be done in freshman Comp; most students have stopped wondering.

Nevertheless, in my class some writing did get done, although it came as a surprise to all of us. One day two of the girls asked if they could have part of the next class to do some readers' theater, something they'd picked up in speech class. Not expecting much, I reserved some time for them. Two days later, they showed up with popcorn, pretzels, cake and cookies, and we started off the class with a coffee break. Then when everyone was comfortable, the girls brought out their scripts -- which they had written themselves -- and asked for volunteers to do the reading. They set up chairs, arranged the blocking of the readers and supplied the cues. Thanks to their efforts, the readers joined in with energy, and the scenes came off pretty well.

This class seemed more like an hour of party games than anything else, and yet it was after this that some of the students began bringing their roommates and boyfriends to class. We got used to having one or two new faces with us, and the visitors seemed to like participating in the smaller discussion groups. Finally, towafd the end of the semester, another girl brought in a paper with a difference. She wanted to ditto it off for the class, but insisted that

it wasn't just a freshman theme, and she didn't want it considered that way. Her essay was about the Channakuh season. She was Orthodox Jewish, and wanted everyone to know at least a little bit about the holiday -- what it was and how it had started. When the class came back from discussing the paper, they probably hadn't learned much about Judaism, since some were puzzled even by the references to the Old Testament, but they did realize that she had written something meant for <u>them</u>; they had finally become a real audience, so that the successes and failures of the paper were equally real, and therefore instructive.

The story ends with that paper, because it marked the finish of our eternal preparations for writing, and the first occasion of that Dialogue With An Audience, which as John Ciardi suggested, is really the only kind of writing there is. As long as the audience is <u>only</u> a mirror, the Narcissus in us is doomed, even though reflections (or feedback) might be precise and revealing. After all, performances don't exist solely for the sake of reviews, and real audiences aren't made up only of critics. Naturally, good critics are necessary both for teachers and writers; but it is only when the reflection becomes reciprocal -- when the individual and the audience mirror each other -- that the individual's personal voice is affirmed, because his special insights extend the understanding of the audience. There is certainly no sure-fire method for improving students' writing. But if we can provide a genuine audience for someone's work, it is a bit more likely that he will try to write better because he feels he is contributing something, and he wants it to be well received. To engender this kind of writer-audience relationship, a teacher has to devote himself to the complexities

of group work; he must prepare the group activities carefully beforehand and then be willing to endure a certain amount of confusion and disappointment. But perhaps the effort is worth making.